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Tammisto, Tuomas

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LIFE IN THE VILLAGE IS FREE: SOCIALLY REPRODUCTIVE WORK AND ALIENATED LABOUR ON AN OIL PALM PLANTATION IN POMIO, PAPUA NEW GUINEA

ABSTRACT

In this article I examine how Mengen working on and living near to a newly established oil palm plantation use the distinct categories of ‘village’ and ‘plantation’ to refer to different sets of relations and historical processes associated with the places. For the Mengen workers the plantation is simultaneously a place of hard and controlled labor, a site of earning sorely needed monetary income, and a place to momentarily escape relations in the village. The vast majority of Mengen workers are oriented towards village life and channel substantial amounts of their income back to the village. By examining the circulation of things and people between the plantation and surrounding villages, I look at how the two places, and the larger orders they represent, are in a direct, unequal, and complex relation with one another. While the surrounding villages subsidize the plantation and provide cheap labor, for the Mengen workers, the plantation is a place for reproducing village life and a generative place of forming new social relations. As both an oppressive and generative place, it is for the Mengen highly ambiguous, as are the larger orders it materializes and stands for.

Keywords: ambiguity, oil palm, Papua New Guinea, peasants, place, plantation, social reproduction

INTRODUCTION¹

‘Life in the village is free.’

This was a phrase I often heard during my fieldwork in Wide Bay Mengen villages in Pomio District (East New Britain Province, Papua New Guinea). People used it to compare life in the rural villages with that in the towns. In

this discourse, towns were sites of money use and commodities, places where people had to pay for everything, whereas villages were the opposite, a contrast used by the Mengen living in villages as well as those holding salaried positions in towns. Those with less access to money were especially aware that in town one indeed had to pay for everything, even for the most basic things such as food and accommodation. In the villages,

on the other hand, inhabitants produced their own livelihoods. People also used it to contrast villages and a new oil palm plantation with each other. In reference to the plantation, life being free acquired a new nuance. Plantations were not only places of wages and the use of money, but also of regimented and controlled labour. In the village, one worked as one pleased whereas on the plantation one had to work according to the commands and schedules of others.

In this article I examine the Tzen oil palm plantation in Pomio as a place of controlled or alienated labour, wages, and the use of money. As a place it is very different from the village. Vast areas of forest have been cleared and people who had worked on the plantation described it to me as a 'desert'. The nearby environment of the Wide Bay Mengen villages is characterized by swidden gardens, fallowing forests in different stages of growth, and dense rainforest extending into the inland areas. It is dotted with small places of importance: streams, burial sites, abandoned villages, and fallowing gardens. For those who inhabit it, the village landscape is a materialization of their histories and activities (Tammisto 2019). The plantation, on the other hand, is made into a 'legible' environment, a place more easily administered and controlled by the management (Scott 1998: 30). It too, is a materialization of histories and relations, but of very different kinds.

The oil palm plantation was established in 2008 by Tzen Niugini—a subsidiary of the Malaysian logging company Cakar Alam (Filer 2013: 320; PNGi 2018)—in the northeastern part of Wide Bay on the east coast of New Britain Island. The nursery and parts of the plantation are located on 10,000 ha of state land, alienated during the colonial era (Tzen Niugini Ltd. 2005: 61). In 2009 Tzen Niugini subleased a further 25,000 ha of customary land for 99 years from a landowner group established

by five Simbali men representing the Simbali Baining, the customary landowners. The lease was done under the now controversial lease-back scheme² known as Special Agriculture and Business Leases (SABL) (Filer 2012: 599; Tammisto 2016: 52).³ The plantation is a part of the Ili-Wawas Integrated Rural Development Project through which local politicians wanted to bring income, employment, infrastructure, and services to Pomio. According to the plan, in exchange for logging concessions and land for oil palm development, companies would connect the existing logging roads of Pomio to the provincial road network, provide employment, and fund services (Tammisto 2010; 2016).

Soon after the plantation was established, many inhabitants of the Pomio district took on wage labor on it, including the Wide Bay Mengen who hosted me when I conducted fieldwork in the area in 2011–2012 and 2014. The Wide Bay Mengen inhabit eight village communities some 60 km south of the Tzen plantation, and speak the North Coast dialect of Mengen. During my fieldwork, I focused mainly on how the Mengen cultivate and hold their land and engage with each other, companies, and the state of PNG in the context of logging, wage labour, and local conservation initiatives. By the time of writing this, the Wide Bay Mengen had not leased their lands for oil palm development, although some landowner groups had allowed Tzen Niugini to conduct logging on their lands.

The new oil palm plantation differed from the village in important ways, not only in terms of landscape and spatial features, but also due to the different kinds of relationships which it gave rise to. The two places were associated with, and stood for, different ways of life with different relational and historical connections. And when people referred to the village by noting that life there is free, or that on the plantation one is

a slave, they evoked these relations and histories—condensed in the place, so to speak. As Rupert Stasch (2013: 555) aptly notes, certain spatial formations can hold special historical power because of the multiple relational connections they mediate.

Places are for the Mengen materializations of different types of relations (Tammisto 2019). In societies which emphasize the spatial aspect of relations, processes, and stories, places laden with meaning can be used to mediate history and historical processes (Stasch 2013: 566). First, as noted, the places stand for a multitude of relations. Second, meaningful places can be contrasted with other places, and this makes a frame around which ‘many domains of life can be organized in a single broad polarity’ (Stasch 2013: 566). By contrasting the village and the plantation the Mengen reflected on the different relations and ways of life associated with them. But people did not just contrast these places in their talk, they also *moved* between them.

In this article I seek to unpack the social relations, histories, and processes materialized by the oil palm plantation (see Bernstein and Pitt 1974; Dennis [1980]; Firth 1972; Keesing 1986; Panoff 1969; White and Dasgupta 2010). I then look at the plantation as a site of earning money and channeling it back to the village (also Carrier and Carrier 1989; Curry and Koczberski 1998; Robbins and Akin 1999) and finally as a generative, yet ambivalent, site, where people form new relations, escape others, and endure hard labor to reproduce life in the villages (Bashkow 2006; Keesing 1986; Stasch 2013). The ambivalence revolves around different understandings of ‘work’, commodified labour, and socially productive activity, and the different values they produce. By contrasting the plantation and the village, the Mengen reflect on different value regimes and by moving between the places, they pursue and escape these systems

as well as combine them in their lives (Stasch 2013: 566).

LIFE ON THE PLANTATION

*We three rise to go and leave
you to the village left behind
I cry for my child—my leaf of rin, my leaf of papi
muteness overcomes me for you in the place of Masrau
I lift my legs into the boat and my thoughts return
to my child left behind*
—lament song (recorded in Wawas village 2.11.2011)

In this lament a Mengen woman describes the sorrow of leaving her child in the custody of relatives when she and her husband go to work on the plantation. The Mengen lament songs are a genre mostly, but not exclusively, composed by women, in which they publicly express personal sorrow, or longing and nostalgia (Mengen: *lonane*). They are about sorrowful events, such as the death of a relative, but also disputes and accusations against people held dear, and are publicly performed during initiation rituals when very old songs, composed by people long since gone, and new, previously unperformed songs are presented. Women turn personal experiences into shared history through them. The song aptly illustrates a common experience. Especially young people often wanted to go to the plantation, because for them it was a welcome change from the routines of village life. On the other hand, work on the plantation was hard and people longed for relatives they had left behind. It is this ambiguity of plantation life on which I focus.

When I visited the plantation in 2012, there was only one compound in which workers lived. (Later, new compounds were established as the plantation expanded.) There were stark contrasts in how the housing of the different groups of plantation personnel was arranged.

The supervisors, drawn from the workers who came from Pomio or PNG, were living in new barrack-style permanent houses with little cooking huts and shared toilets. The workers, likewise both from Pomio and other parts of PNG, lived in huts they had themselves built from bush materials and corrugated iron provided by the company. The Mengen workers lived separated according to gender and the male and female areas were divided by cordyline plantings. People from the same villages shared houses and different language groups gathered together. According to the workers, this was not the outcome of deliberation, but rather how things had turned out over time. Their water supply was a small stream nearby and they had no toilets. The shacks were partly hidden by fast growing decorative plants and banana trees they had planted, much in the same style as in the villages. In fact, the contrast between the workers' area and the regimented houses of the supervisors was striking. Whereas the latter was a picture book example of what James Scott (1998) calls a legible environment, easily grasped and controlled, the former was its opposite, with houses built on demand and not according to requirements of control. The area inhabited by workers was 'weedy', to use Anna Tsing's (2005: 174) metaphor for describing seemingly messy and unruly landscapes. 'Weediness' is the opposite of the allegedly disciplined order of monocultures. Many of the practices by the workers on the plantation were weedy, as I will show more in depth below.

The plants covering the workers' housing area served both aesthetic and livelihood needs, and provide an example of how the workers creatively organized life on the plantation; yet we should not romanticize its 'weedy' aspects. The poor state of the housing was a common complaint and some noted how a 'proper company' would have started out by building

houses for the workers. The lack of proper toilets coupled with dependence on nearby streams for water was a potentially dangerous combination. The houses of the Mengen workers were simple dirt-floored huts, which in some cases the workers had hooked up to the company's electricity network. There were also differences between the living conditions of workers employed in different tasks or from different backgrounds. Some loggers lived in huts or tents in the bush while Indonesian logging contractors lived near the compounds in metal shipping crates with windows cut into them. The abysmal housing of the Indonesian workers reflects their difficult position: migrant workers totally dependent on the company in a foreign country. Workers from Pomio at least had the possibility to vote with their feet and leave—something which they often did.

The poor condition of housing is a common feature of plantation agriculture. In the US, for example, immigrant workers on tobacco farms live in harsh conditions in labor camps, and agricultural workers are the worst housed group (Benson 2008: 601; 2010: 57). Peter Benson (2008: 603; 2010: 57) describes how tobacco growers justify this situation by portraying the immigrant workers as less deserving, adding that the quality of housing is better 'than in Mexico', for example. For the immigrant workers the conditions of the camp are not only uncomfortable, but also demeaning. Thus the camp is a 'dispossessed space' (Benson 2008: 601, 607). Interestingly, the migrant laborers on tobacco farms used the term 'campo', which literally means 'work camp', to refer to low wages and other poor conditions of farm labor, remarking, for example, that the wages of farm labour are *campo* (Benson 2008: 590, 598). This is an example of using a place as a sign, inasmuch as the work camp, *campo*, is used to refer to a broad spectrum of social relations and

processes, such as poor working conditions and hierarchical labour relations (Stasch 2013: 555, 560).

According to Peter Benson (2008: 590), the unequal relations of farm labour amount to structural violence in that they represent the systemic constitution of inequality and suffering. The cause and maintenance of unequal labour relations is a result of, and perpetuated by, a convergence of large-scale political-economic forces and intimate interpersonal relations (Benson 2008: 594, 596, 620). Tobacco growers in the US are at the mercy of big agribusiness companies with flexible buying networks. One way for growers to compete in the international commodity markets is to cut the costs of wages and worker housing, which systemic government neglect of labour law enforcement allows. (Benson 2008: 594; 2010: 57; 2012: 135, 173). Equally crucial are the stereotypes of immigrants that contribute to their being perceived as less deserving. The negative perceptions of workers by growers and their justifications for the inequality do not result from a lack of engagement between the workers and growers. Rather, how people see others also legitimizes their treatment (Benson 2008: 596, 620).

The situation in Pomio was similarly produced. During my visit to the plantation, the plantation manager, a Malaysian man, told me that the houses inhabited by the supervisors are intended for the workers and new houses for the supervisors were being built. According to him, the workers and supervisors should live separately in order 'to maintain a standard'. These spatial divisions maintain and reflect the hierarchies of plantation work. He also noted that with the plantation the company was trying to bring development to give people the chance to earn cash income, a commonly voiced aim of these projects. These statements also

implicitly present the workers as poor, indeed primitive, people, who should be grateful for the opportunity to be able to earn money on the plantation—a variation of the 'better than Mexico' theme.

REGIMENTED WORK

Work there [on the plantation] is good. They don't beat us. (woman, mid-20s, 2011-07-13)

This is how a young Mengen woman described work on the plantation to me. In structured interviews in particular, Mengen workers responded in characteristically reticent Mengen fashion by saying that it was 'just good' (Tok Pisin: *gut tasol*). When conversation was more relaxed, they elaborated and gave a more detailed picture. Most of my interviewees and friends noted that pay was often an issue. The Tzen plantation had, according to an experienced oil palm worker, implemented minimum wages (PGK 2.29/h), unlike other oil palm companies. Those workers who were employed at the nursery, where oil palm seedlings are grown and prepared for planting, and those working 'in-field' doing the planting, were paid according to completed tasks and thus the fortnightly wages fluctuated. Workers were not paid for days on which they did not work, such as when sick. Others noted that they did not understand subtractions from wages and this caused arguments with supervisors. The young woman quoted above noted that often the Mengen workers did not complain, as the Mengen avoid direct arguments among themselves as well as with others.

The workers also noted that on the plantation one works not as one pleases, but under the command of others. This is one of the defining features of a plantation, characterized by a rigid division of labour and class-distinction

between workers and managers (Dennis [1980]: 219, 237; Benson 2008: 600; Bernstein and Pitt 1974: 514). Work on the plantation in Pomio, like elsewhere, was indeed regimented and highly divided. Workers were employed in different sections with their own tasks, all of which were necessary for the proper functioning of the plantation. Skilled workers were needed as mechanics, carpenters, and electricians, and maintained and built plantation equipment and buildings. Some workers were employed at the saw-mill making lumber. As the plantation was new, clearing the forest was a major task and loggers were in high demand. Many of the specialized tasks, such as logging and carpentry for building, were performed by workers employed by contractors from Indonesia and Malaysia. These jobs in particular were open to young men with vocational education or skills acquired through previous work experience.

Some men from the Wide Bay Mengen villages had become skilled in using heavy chainsaws and cross-cutting large logs during the logging operations of the 1990s. Others had also learned to 'rip' planks from logs with a chainsaw to provide villagers with building materials. These men were in high demand among the contractors as loggers. Not only were they proficient with chainsaws, but due to their background as swidden cultivators, they were skilled in felling large trees—a hard and potentially very dangerous task. A friend of mine who worked as a logger told me that many loggers left the work because they were afraid. Rural men, on other hand, did not work in a rush; they studied the trees before felling them and knew how to make them fall in the right direction. He noted how his body knew the trees—referring to the embodied knowledge of how to behave when felling them. He took pride in his skill and that he worked carefully, avoiding unnecessary accidents and performing

work that was heavy and dangerous. Yet, like other Mengen men who had worked as loggers, he was dissatisfied with the low pay (PGK 2.29/h) and because they were not compensated for injuries:

The contractor does not pay for our blood
[if we are hurt]. (man, 39 years, 2011-10-27)

The bulk of the workers were employed as unskilled labour at the nursery and in the field, a group which included most of the workers from the Wide Bay villages. The work was also gendered in as much as while both men and women were employed as unskilled labour, no women from the villages where I conducted research were employed as skilled workers, although at least one served as a supervisor at one point. Work at the nursery and 'in-field' was the main type of labour on the plantation—the dull and repetitive tasks needed to plant and maintain the crops. At the nursery this consisted of planting seedlings—filling plastic bags with soil, planting seedlings into the bags and lifting the bags of oil palms ready for placing on tractors. In the field slashers cut the grass and weeds around the palms with long knives. During my visit I was able to follow a planting section through their routines: some stayed at the nursery, while those working 'in-field' dug holes, unloaded and aligned the seedlings, fertilized holes or planted the palms.

Each worker performed only one particular task and was paid according to how many palms they planted or holes they dug. Needless to say, the work was extremely demanding. The seedlings in their plastic bags are heavy and the palm stems have sharp needles. After rain the bulldozed soil turns into a field of mud where walking, let alone digging, is demanding and there is no shade whatsoever. Most of the workers went barefoot as rubber boots

had to be bought, and only a few had gloves. The sprayers, who spray pesticides onto the grown palms, likewise complained they had no protective gear of any kind. A middle-aged Mengen man working as a planter said that the work is extremely hard, but had to be done to raise money for school fees, without which there would be no educated people.

The regimentation of work was a striking feature. The workers were divided into sections each with its particular tasks; the work day started at five o'clock with the ringing of a bell which called the workers to the assembly area where they stood in lines according to their section, with their supervisors standing in front of them. After the plantation catechist had read a brief prayer, the plantation manager allocated tasks to the assistant managers and supervisors, who then instructed the workers in their sections. This all bears an obvious resemblance to military camps and other 'total institutions'. Thus, as Michael Dove notes (2012: 23), plantations are not just agronomic sites of exploitation, but epistemological and political projects producing social relations of certain kinds. Dove likens the estates to Foucauldian panopticons, where power is not only asserted through the surveillance of everyday life, but also through more discreet and seemingly apolitical structuring of these lives through the 'conduct of conduct' (Dove 2012: 30; Tammisto 2016).

The workers were obviously very aware of this, and people often left the plantation when they had had enough—often without any forewarning. As in Dove's (2012: 222) description of rubber plantations in Borneo, where Dayak workers are often regarded by the managers as hard-headed and lazy, so too the manager told me that many of the workers 'are not yet accustomed to work'. In the sense of being able and willing to do physical work,

this is, of course, not true at all. The inhabitants of Pomio and other rural areas of PNG, were accustomed to extremely hard work in their swidden gardens and performed exhausting physical labour on the plantations. In fact, because they were experienced in felling large trees in their gardens, the Mengen were valued as loggers, doing underpaid yet dangerous work. Rather than being about what the workers were or were not accustomed to, the question was about political relations on the plantation; this is obfuscated by statements such as people 'do not know how to work' and spurious explanations that their unwillingness to submit themselves to certain relations is because they lack skill—as Dove (2012: 195, 225) notes.

The portraying of workers in this light was, as noted above, a way in which class distinctions on the plantation were maintained. It also points to very different understandings between the plantation management and rural Mengen over what is productive and meaningful work. For the management, 'proper work' means adhering to the plantation mode of production, while for the Mengen the idiom of 'hard work' means something different: socially productive activity, as I will illustrate in the following sections. Plantation labour, in the Mengen sense, is 'hard' or socially productive only if the wages are used for social reproduction, as many Mengen do.

The workers with whom I spoke seemed all to prefer the 'taskscape' (Ingold 2000: 325) of the village, where the rhythm of work comes from the task at hand rather than being determined by abstract time, as on the plantation. Yet, despite the exhausting work on the plantation, it seemed to me that, especially for young people, work there also provided a welcome change from the village routines. The logger mentioned above said that his brother, an experienced plantation worker, had told him to leave village work and come to the

plantation to 'relax' for a while. Another young man explained that he took on plantation work so that 'the mouths of the elders could get some rest', referring to the control and discipline of the elders. A young woman described how she and other young villagers had decided to go to the plantation⁴:

We were [in the village], and kastom was over, so we thought about going. Us women said: 'Oh, we're tired of gardening work, let's go to Masrau to make us some money.'
(woman, mid-20s, 2011-07-13)

Despite the hardships of plantation life, for young people wage labour was also a way to ascertain their independence, 'rest' from village commitments and responsibilities, see different places and live among their peers in a different setting than the village. The seeming paradox of calling exhausting and alienated life and labour on the plantation 'relaxing' makes sense given that the Mungen mean with the idiom of 'hard work' (Mungen: *klingnan ti main*) socially productive activity, namely the creation and reproduction of valued social relations. For the Mungen, 'hard work' encompasses a variety of different activities from care and nurture to socially reproductive ceremonies. Gardening and tending of plants (nurture in itself) produces the food and the act of giving food to someone is the most paradigmatic form of care that creates and maintains a variety of social relations, not least important kinship relations.

This 'hard work' produces value, but its commitments and responsibilities are also hard and heavy. This resembles Ira Bashkow's (2006) notion of how for the Orokaiva of PNG bearing of responsibilities is valuable and makes one a proper human being, but it is also a heavy burden. More so, the 'lightness' of being free of such burdens, often associated with commodity

relations (and 'whiteness'), is at the same time fascinating and repulsive for the Orokaiva (Bashkow 2006). As I will show more in depth below, wage labour on the plantation allowed momentary escape from the burdens of 'hard work', while at the same time it was also a means to earn sorely needed money, which the Mungen workers shared and gave to their relatives, thus converting wage labour into hard work.

WOK MANI—WAGE LABOUR

When discussing my plans to visit the plantation with my host brother—a highly educated young man—I mentioned that I was interested to know why people go to the plantations. He looked at me as if I was rather thick and replied: 'What do you think? Money of course.' Phrasing my answer badly, I said that so much was obvious, but money for what?—thinking about the wide range of needs from school fees to tools, as well as the creative uses of money in Melanesian societies (see Robbins and Akin 1999). Interpreting my answer in a way I did not intend, my brother angrily replied: 'Do you think we do not need money?' His reply clearly illustrates two important points. First, people take on wage work because they need money. This is a deceptively simple statement, as the need for money is not an endogenous property of it, but often has to be created; consequently, people need money for a variety of reasons. Secondly, it shows that the Mungen were painfully aware that, as rural cultivators who grew their own food, they were often thought to live outside the money economy—thus needing less money. This, too, is an important and complicated point.

As growers of their own food the rural Mungen were indeed less dependent on money and more secured against, say, rises in food prices than the urban poor. In a classic Marxist sense

they were not proletarians, as they owned their land and also had something else to sell besides their labour time. The Wide Bay Mengen can be better thought of as peasants. I use here Michael Watts' (2009: 524) definition of peasants as people distinguished by their direct access to land as a means of production, their predominant use of family labour, their partial engagement with markets, and their subordinate position in larger political economies (see also Meillassoux 1973: 81; Meggit 1971: 208–9; Wolf 1966: 18, 25). More precisely, they were food-producing peasants who gained monetary income from cash-cropping of copra and cacao and occasional compensations from logging, but were not solely dependent on money for their livelihood (Bernstein 1979: 429). This gave them a degree of autonomy and security. With reduced possibilities of selling their produce, however (Allen 2009: 296; Allen et al. 2009: 477, 486), the importance of wage labour as a source of income had increased (Tammisto 2016).

That the Mengen needed money was obvious as they have been involved in wage labour and commodity relations for about 150 years. During colonialism, commodity and wage labour relations did not just develop by themselves, but had to be imposed through measures such as the introduction of taxes payable only in government money in order to transform rural peoples into workers and small-scale commodity producers. Likewise, some European-made commodities, such as steel tools, were quickly incorporated into non-capitalist modes of production, while others were quite blatantly advertised and imposed in order to tie the independent New Guineans more tightly into the market economy—with 'tobacco schools' providing a case in point (Firth 1972: 365). During the time of my fieldwork, money was especially needed for school fees.

In addition, basic items such as tools needed in swidden horticulture, clothing, medicine, household utensils, building material, and so on, all required money, along with boats, outboard motors, and gasoline required for transportation in an area where roads were few and unconnected. Money and commodities were a part of everyday life and needed for the physical reproduction of people.

In my interviews and discussions with villagers who had been or were working on the plantation, I asked if they had certain explicit needs for money which prompted them to take on wage labour. Young people in particular noted that they had 'aims'. Along with the general needs and school fees mentioned above, one of the most common answers was corrugated iron used for roofs. Roofing iron might sound trivial, but it highlights an important issue. The young who went to the plantation were ultimately oriented towards the village. Their aim was not to become full-time labourers and leave farming, but to return to their village and continue life there. This contrasts with Tania Li's (2011: 295) provocative notion that there is no reason to assume that people would prefer not to make a transition from subsistence agriculture to wage labour—a view which suggests that rather than being an attachment to an 'ancestral way of life', subsistence farming for many is the only way of survival because transition to wage labour is not possible. While Li is right in pointing out that there is no reason to categorically assume that all subsistence farmers want to remain in that role, most of the Mengen workers whom I talked with definitely wanted to return to the village.

The wages at the plantation were not high. The minimum wage was PGK 2.29/h and, as noted above, most unskilled labourers were paid according to the tasks performed.⁵ The fortnightly wages paid to planters and nursery

workers were usually somewhere between PGK 150–200—less if the worker missed workdays. Workers occasionally complained about the low pay:

Sometimes we complain. They say: 'Now, I am not able to change the wages, because the company is new and has not much money.' That's what they tell us, you just keep working.
(man, 30s, 2011-07-17)

The plantation was not only a site of monetary income, but also one where money could be spent. The plantation had at least one store where workers and their families could buy basic commodities such as rice, tinned food, and other household items. A new supermarket operated by a Chinese trader at the nearby 'growth-center' at Tol offered a wide variety of items. If workers bought their food from the store, however, their wages were quickly spent so for many the plantation was a site of *not* using money. One widely practiced way to do this was by growing their food on the plantation in garden plots: especially sweet potato, a fast growing staple, but also taro and yam, as well as other foods also grown in the villages. The garden plots were dug in the cleared areas and gardening at the plantation was faster, because no large trees needed to be felled or fences built; as the forests were clear-felled, wild pigs moved away into forests that were not logged.

Some workers also planted their food crops amidst the oil palms where they grew well until the palms started carrying fruit. During the early years of the plantation, growing food was easier, as the cleared areas were nearer and the oil palms not yet planted or only seedlings. People noted that during that time food grew fast and plentifully—it was after all planted on land cleared of old-growth forests—to the extent that food from the plantation was occasionally

sent back to the villages, often as contributions for feasts. But when the oil palms started to mature, the situation was reversed and relatives began sending food baskets to the workers on boats going to the plantation. Growing food was important for many workers. Garden food was often preferred to that which was store bought as it was considered 'strong' and more nourishing (see also Bashkow 2006). Likewise, with the low wages it allowed the rural Mengen workers, who were skilled gardeners, to save some of their income.

Planting food amidst the oil palms or cultivating gardens on recently cleared areas was one of the weedy ways in which the workers coped on the plantation, but it also had its downside. As noted by Bernstein (1979: 436), among others, the value of commodities produced by peasants is often lessened through their use-value production—by gardening in this case—in that their reproduction is 'subsidized' by it. I argue that this applies to the Mengen wage workers, as the value of their labour commodity was lessened precisely by this subsidy. Or to put it in more conventional terms, the workers could—and were partly willing to—work at low wages with the help of swidden horticulture at home or on the plantation. In fact, the availability of cheap manual labour often enabled investment in estate plantations in the first place, something achieved by maintaining existing social relations and non-capitalist modes of production (Bernstein and Pitt 1974: 519; Meillassoux 1973: 89). As Bernstein and Pitt (1974: 515) have noted, plantations often co-exist with a substantial peasant sector. Thus, under Australian colonial rule, maintaining 'traditional society' and land rights through 'protective' laws was also in the interests of the colonizers in order to maintain the labour supply (Fitzpatrick 1980: 83), particularly after commodities had become

necessities. While this is not meant to suggest that workers were acting against their own interests, it does illustrate the labour dynamics of contemporary plantations—with the obvious implication that, in this regard, plantations have changed little over time.

CONVERTING LABOUR INTO WORK

I need money to build a house. For bride-wealth. And to take care of my family. (man, 30s, 2011-07-17)

I first met many of the workers whom I have cited here after I had been conducting my fieldwork in Pomio for a few months. The absence of people in many Mengen villages was striking and in Toimtop where I mostly stayed, it was mostly the young who had left for the plantation. Then the last founding member of the village died of old age, and they all returned to her funeral. Suddenly the village was busy with people engaged in the tasks of mortuary ceremonies: digging the grave, collecting firewood for earth ovens, carrying pigs, bringing in food, and staying with the family in mourning. The young people had not come home empty-handed; they brought with them bales of rice to be served during the ceremonies as well as money.

During these discussions I learned about the ‘aims’ of the plantation workers and that very few had actually attained them. This was not only because life on the plantation required money, but also because workers often gave substantial amounts of their wages back to the village as various contributions to local needs: informal requests by relatives or formal collections to contribute to ceremonial exchanges, church activities, and the like. Some had even gone to work on the plantations in

order to accumulate money for their relatives’ ceremonies, usually bridewealth gifts. A good friend of mine told me that his father had asked him to go to the plantation to help the family gather money for his cross-cousin, who was to be ordained as a priest. The clan mates of the future priest and his cross-cousins had formed a ‘family group’ to finance his studies, a permanent house, and the expenses of his ordination feast. Each household involved had agreed to come up with at least PGK 1,000.

My friend had contributed PGK 600 in cash along with various transportation costs. Another young woman had contributed PGK 450 to another seminarian, PGK 50 for a mortuary feast, and PGK 200 for the school fees of relatives. The contributions were high, compared to the relatively low wages earned on the plantation. In my conversations and interviews I asked the workers if they resented paying the contributions or not reaching their ‘aims’. Nobody would admit to it and mostly I was told that this was just basic reciprocity; they had been helped by relatives when they attended school and now it was time to help out in return. The workers seemed to share their money in much the same way as they would share things such as food, betel nut, or tobacco with their fellows.

Socially reproductive rituals also required money. Money and other store-bought commodities had become an integral part of the gift exchanges. Most explicitly this was the case in bridewealth exchanges where cash money was part of the gift. The bridewealth consisted of (in order of the importance given to the items) shell valuables, pigs, garden produce, money, store-bought loincloths, as well as foods (rice and tinned meat). The amounts of cash given could be thousands of Kina, certainly up to PGK 5,000. In addition to the other commodities which are given, money is sometimes used

to buy pigs and even shell valuables. Only domestic pigs, raised by the giver or bought, could be given as gifts. Other exchanges, such as those held during initiations or mortuary feasts, do not feature large amounts of cash, which is given as minor gifts to individuals (ranging from PGK 5–100 PGK per person), but money is also required for rice, tinned meat, and pigs, so in total the money involved can amount to considerable sums. When the Mengen exchanged substantial quantities of commodities as gifts, it is tempting to say that they have successfully ‘domesticated’ them, or that the ceremonial exchanges converted commodities into socially reproductive gifts. This indeed is part of the story.

As noted, the idiomatic expression of ‘hard work’ is used for particular kinds of work, which I have labelled ‘socially productive’. Socially productive activity can range from gardening, the tending of plants to care and nurture given to others, as well as socially reproductive rituals, and this type of work is recognized as a source of value particularly in the village context. Thus giving wild pigs in ceremonies, because they can be ‘simply’ hunted in the bush, would incur great shame as they are not valuable since no hard work is invested in them. Pigs bought from elsewhere, or even from fellow villagers, however, were a common feature in Mengen rituals, because, as a young man explained to me, acquiring money was hard work. It was, however, not the physical properties that makes something ‘hard work’, but how the results of work are distributed and to what ends (Robbins and Akin 1999: 15, 23, 34; also Fajans 1997: 70). If and when money was shared and given as gifts to contribute to the well-being of others, it was used for nurturing and that made it ‘hard work’. The Mengen notion of ‘hard work’ as socially productive activity, differs obviously very much

from the plantation managers’ view of work as alienated and controlled labour.

The workers on the plantation used money to take care of their relatives and finance village projects and ceremonies. In short, they reproduced social relations in the village. This does not mean that things do not change. Plantations have, since their establishment in the late 19th century, been places of contact between Melanesians and Europeans and between people from different parts of Melanesia (Keesing 1986; Panoff 1969; see also Kituai 1998: 84, 244) and thus have substantial time depth as well as regional scope. Through this network, new commodities as well as stories, spells, and ideas spread throughout Melanesian societies (Keesing 1986: 163, 169). The plantation in Pomio was a generative space, where people from different parts of Pomio, PNG, and other countries met and established new relationships. Young people from different Mengen villages paired up on the plantation with each other and also married people from other parts of PNG. In the latter case, the workers either followed their spouses or brought them back to their home villages. This too, was the reproduction of a well established convention: the Wide Bay Mengen have been marrying into other linguistic groups for a long time and these contacts have often occurred on plantations.

The kin relations established on the plantations were not just confined to marriages. A friend of mine who worked as a logger on the Masrau plantation said that he had adopted an older man from the Highlands as his father. The old man had come to work on the plantation, but could not keep up and was alone. My friend told me how sorry he felt for him, and that he had proposed that he come and live with the loggers in their forest camp and guard the loggers’ hut during the day in exchange for

a small allowance paid by the logger. The old man agreed and over the course of time as the relationship deepened, the logger started calling the old man his father, as did the logger's sisters. This initially surprised their fellow villagers who commented that the man was from another part of PNG and not really their father; but the sisters noted that the old man always fed them and never refused any of their requests, and the villagers came to agree that he was indeed a real father. Finally the biological father of the logger started to call the Highlands man his brother. This case of adoption was certainly the most unusual one encountered, but it demonstrates both how care and nurture are the basis of Mengen conceptions of kinship, and also the generative nature of the plantation spaces.

Money, commodities, and wage labour have for a long time been part of the life of the Mengen. Money earned from alienated labour is an important feature of social reproduction and in the villages it is transformed, by sharing and giving it as gifts, into 'hard work' as the Mengen understand it.

CONCLUSION

The rural Mengen went to the plantation for varying periods of time, but most of them remained oriented towards the village. People explicitly said they want to return; they valued village life more and their plans to use their wages usually involved a project in the village. Much of the money was channeled back to the village; alienated wage labour was, so to speak, converted into 'hard'—that is, socially productive—work. People moved between the village and the plantation to live out different relationships (see Stasch 2013: 557), for example young people moving to the plantation to escape the routines of village life, see new places, and pursue their individual aims. But, more

importantly, people often went to the plantation and to work in other salaried positions in order to finance life in the village. The village and the plantation then, as places of different kinds of relations, articulate with each other.

Plantations greatly benefit from the subsidies of the surrounding peasant sector, in as much as peasants whose livelihood is secured from subsistence agriculture can work for low wages (Bernstein 1979: 436; Bernstein and Pitt 1974: 515; Dennis [1980]: 232 Fitzpatrick (1980), 83; Meillassoux 1973: 89; White and Dasgupta 2010: 599). Important as this notion is in capturing many real dynamics between industrial agriculture and the surrounding countryside, it often reduces the role of the village to a passive source of subsidies and labour, stripped of its own dynamics, as James and Achsah Carrier (1989: 9–10, 228–29) aptly note in their study of migrant labour in Ponam on Manus Island. Remittances sent back home contributed in various ways to the social life and dynamics of Ponam and the migrant workers' channeling money back has been a central adaptation to colonialism (Carrier and Carrier 1989: 228–29). Likewise, in many parts of PNG, both short and long-term migration, for instance to plantations, have for a long time been integrated into the lives of people (see Curry and Koczberski 1998).

The comfortable life in Ponam also encouraged migrant workers to maintain good relations with their home village (Carrier and Carrier 1989: 183–84). This is a central aspect of the dynamic between 'village and town'; James Ferguson (1999: 132, 140, 164) shows, for example, that for the urban workers of the Zambian mining belt one retirement strategy was to move back home to the rural areas, but that this was only successful if they had maintained good relations with their rural kin. The village orientation of the Wide Bay Mengen

workers was also exemplified by their attitude to regimented labour and the controlled life at the plantation. While the young in particular went to the plantation not only to make money, but also to experience something new, the workers clearly preferred the freedom of their own work pace in the village.

The relationship between the new oil palm plantation and the Wide Bay Mengen villages reflects both these dynamics. On the one hand, the plantation gains important 'subsides' from the villages in terms of cheap labour. On the other hand, the plantation is a site where people make the money required for the social and physical reproduction of life in the village. The Mengen, while independent in terms of subsistence, do not live outside the money economy; money became a necessity a long time ago. More important than trying to establish the degree of commodity production in relation to subsistence activities, is whether commodity production and money have become social necessities, as noted by Bernstein (1979: 426). Even if the Mengen villagers needed relatively less money than the urban proletariat, they still need it and have to get it somewhere.

The circulation of things between the village and the plantation exemplifies the relationship between the two places from the point of view of the workers and villagers. The villagers send garden food by the basket to the plantation and occasionally also go there to sell betel nut and fruits. This village produce is converted directly into commodities when sold for money, as in the case of betel nuts and fruit, or in the case of food, more indirectly into money as the food allows workers to save their wages—much of which the workers give to their relatives in the village. When shared in this way, it is 'converted' again into 'hard work' as the Mengen understand it, namely socially reproductive work that makes and upholds

valued social relations. The plantation, then, produced necessities for the reproduction of the village as much as the village subsidized the plantation.

The relation between the village and the plantation is highly unequal in relation to access to capital and in terms of political-economic power, though in the case of the Mengen it is leveled by the fact that the Mengen lands are not alienated. As Chris Gregory notes, the non-commodification and non-alienation of customary land retained the material basis for the 'gift economies' and their value regimes in PNG (Gregory 1982: 116). This allows the Mengen, too, to convert the wages produced by commodified and alienated labour into socially productive 'hard work' in the village and keep the commodity relations encompassed by their system where the creation and maintenance of social relations is a central value (Tammisto 2019: 248, 258, 261). Due to this, the villages are not passive labour reserves, but places where the pursuit of socially productive values is for the Mengen possible and meaningful.

I began by noting that the ambiguous character of the plantation for the Mengen is largely due to their ambivalent relation to alienated labour and its relation to 'work', understood as socially productive activity. If the reproduction of society and the pursuit of values are, as David Graeber notes (2001: 24), human creative activity, then different values need to be produced by different kinds of work. And in order to understand better the different values people pursue, anthropologists and social theorists need to understand better how people understand and define what produces those values. Mengen 'hard work' not only maintains and produces valued social relations, but through their work, such as gardening, establishing hamlets, and burying people, they also create and re-create meaningful places that index and

materialize those values (Tammisto 2019), just as the plantation materializes the relations of a commodified economy. Movement between these two distinct places allowed people to combine disparate sociocultural principles in their lives (Stasch 2013: 565). This, I think, explains the feeling of many of the Mengen with whom I spoke, who saw the plantation as necessary and in some ways useful—in its place, but only as long as it stayed in its place, and did not creep and take over the land on which the Mengen could work hard—to create and maintain social relations.

NOTES

- 1 This article is based on a total of 15 months of fieldwork conducted in the Wide Bay area of East New Britain province between 2011–2012 and 2014 funded by the University of Helsinki SYLFF-grant and the Academy of Finland (grant 253680). I furthermore want to thank the personnel of the National Research Institute in Papua New Guinea for the help in receiving appropriate research permits. In writing this article I have benefited from the generous comments by Henni Alava, Steffen Dalsgaard, Timo Kaartinen, Anu Lounela, Sonal Makhija, Keir Martin, Jenni Mölkänen, Liina-Maija Quist, Rupert Stasch, and Heikki Wilenius and the two anonymous reviewers. I am especially grateful for Matti Eräsaari for his clarifying, critical, and helpful comments. The research on which this article is based would not have been possible without the help and support of the Wide Bay Mengen communities who hosted me during my fieldwork and opened up their lives for me. It is to them that I owe my greatest gratitude as well as personal and intellectual debts.
- 2 The lease-lease back scheme was added to the land legislation of PNG to compensate for the absence of any method to register customary land titles. In the scheme, the state leases the land from its customary owners and leases it back to the customary owners themselves, who can sub-lease it further, or to other parties approved by the state. Between 2003–2011 about 5 million ha

(11% of PNG's total land area) were leased national and foreign companies under these schemes, constituting a 'land grab'. (Filer 2012.)

- 3 The state land was possibly alienated in the colonial era for coconut plantations as the area is near the old copra plantations of Tol, Karlei, and Kiep. The information on the land lease between Tzen Niugini and the Simbali Incorporated Land Group is based on the lease agreement of which I obtained a copy (Journal number 1.14090—Volume 17, Folio 130).
- 4 Before going to the plantation, the young women had asked male village elders for permission. The men granted it, though in strong and sometimes aggressive terms urged the women not to become pregnant on the plantation. In one case, a young woman did not want to return to her home village after becoming pregnant on the plantation—despite her relatives urging her to return and assuring her she would not be ostracized. While young women initially sought the approval of their parents and village elders, ultimately the decision to go to the plantation was negotiated within their respective families and the women themselves had the final word.
- 5 In 2012 one (1) Papua New Guinea Kina (PGK) was about 0.5 US Dollars (USD) and 0.4 Euro (EUR).

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- Wolf, Eric** 1966. *Peasants*. Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.
- TUOMAS TAMMISTO
POST-DOCTORAL RESEARCHER
SOCIAL AND CULTURAL
ANTHROPOLOGY
UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI
tuomas.tammisto@helsinki.fi